

BEYOND THE PRIMER
VILLAGE LIBRARY PROGRAMME
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Hundreds of village libraries have been set up in different parts of the country by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to provide suitable reading material for the villagers and promote literacy and access to information.

***Beyond the Primer** an extremely honest reflection of the village library project of Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. What have been the flaws? How do you avoid or overcome them In future? What are the positive aspects? How do you enhance them further and sustain the programme? All this and more to get a village library going.*

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BEYOND THE PRIMER



In early 1993, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation started a small pilot project to develop a model for a self-reliant village library. The pilot project was carried out in two villages in two socially, economically and culturally diverse districts - Ajmer in Rajasthan and Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu. Today, five years and a few months later, there is a library in each of the 684 villages of 25 Districts in 10 states (these are listed in Appendix 1) which are often the only avenue for learning and recreation. The programme designed has evolved entirely from the experience of working in the field, and is continuously being improved upon in response to community feedback. Consequently, the process assumes as much importance as the outcome.

The programme was a manifestation of the Foundation's concern to strengthen post-literacy initiatives in the country as district after district achieved total literacy. This offered the opportunity to promote reading materials to this newly literate audience in an attempt to sustain their literacy and with the hope that easy access to knowledge and practical information would vitalise the entire development process. An additional concern related to the growing reach of the satellite media to remote corners of our country. The natural attraction of the visual media offered a challenging backdrop for inculcating a reading habit.

In collaboration with local partner agencies, libraries have been set up in clusters with one library for one village. Each library is housed in an independent room, easily accessible especially for women. The community

has always provided space for the library, and this has been a fundamental operating principle. An initial collection of around 400 books, selected mainly by the readers through book exhibitions, is supplemented by the acquisition of additional books at regular intervals. Books are arranged in an open display so that the readers can feel and sense the ambience generated by books. Two newspapers are sent to the library daily. The libraries are equipped with basic furniture including racks, stationery, maps and charts. A literate person from the village is trained as a librarian. Each library currently costs about Rs. 24,000/- in the first year and Rs. 10,000/- in the second year to equip stock, run and provide training to the librarian.

It is hoped that the village library will evolve as a centre for documenting local knowledge and wisdom through publishing work written by village-based authors. Rural publishing is an important component of the programme. Royalty earned on the sale of these books is shared between the authors and the libraries. Four books have been published so far and one more is in the pipeline. Another function of the library is training members, especially women, to refine their existing skills and technologies.

The strength of the village library programme lies in its emphasis on making each library self reliant, and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation aims to phase out the support for every library it has set up after two to three years. During this period, all costs are covered, such that the library, through its membership fees, contribution of income from skill training and publishing, and individual local fund-raising efforts, should build up a reserve fund and begin to achieve a significant income generation capacity.

The village library programme owes its success to the community's involvement and enthusiasm. It has discredited the popular belief that people in rural areas "do not wish to read and will not pay to read". Today, the library is seen as a good source for practical information in a village. People read because they enjoy it. A reading habit is settling in. Readers are now more clear about their reading preferences, and they are beginning to demand the inclusion of fresh titles regularly. The initial focus on neo-literate adult readers has been broadened to encompass children and youth. Experiments in setting up libraries in the slums of Delhi and Calcutta are under way.



The initiative has, to some extent, had an influence on the post literacy and continuing education programmes of other agencies. Ajmer and Durg, two project districts, have based their programmes on the experiences of the village libraries. The Tamil Nadu government plans to launch a similar initiative. Raja Rammohan Roy Libraries, under the aegis of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, is revising its scheme along similar lines.

The village library programme is a small tribute towards commemorating 50 years of independent India. And this is the right time to discuss a programme inspired by the values and beliefs of our freedom movement - self reliance, self respect and faith in the people.

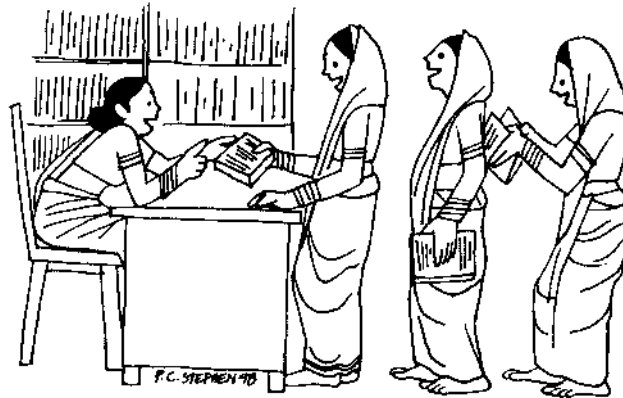
Subsequent sections of this book discuss the evolution, expansion and consolidation of the village library programme, and attempt to illustrate the processes and highlight the key points at each stage. The document strives to present an honest picture of the programme, highlighting the mistakes along with achievements. The aim of publishing this book is to show the importance of the programme as a post-literacy and development initiative, and to encourage development agencies and educational initiatives to consider including village libraries in their programmes. The book is being published alongside a training manual for village libraries and a lively promotional video. The text of the book is divided into the following sections:

Supporting literacy – chalks the genesis of the concept and the evolution of the programme and its design

Expanding the programme - looks at the programme outreach, issues in programme management and roles of various collaborating agencies.

Learning by doing - discusses the various components of the programme as they were refined over time and raises the issue of self-reliance.

Looking ahead - briefly summarises the future concerns of the programme.



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SUPPORTING LITERACY



Since the early eighties, India has seen a significant renewal of a national commitment to fulfil the constitutional mandate of providing Education for All. The National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986) and the Programme of Action (PoA) (1992) reflect a shift in focus from simply providing access to ensuring achievement. The strategy encompasses universalisation of elementary education for all children in the school-going age, and amongst adult illiterates, especially those between 15-35 years of age.

In 1987-88 the National Literacy Mission (NLM) was launched by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. With this, the Adult Education

Programme was steered from a centre-based approach to a mission-mode involving a large number of volunteers and NGOs. Literacy received the necessary impetus to become a “movement”, and was brought to the forefront of India’s development agenda.

The National Literacy Mission adopted the strategy of Total Literacy Campaigns (TLC), with a focus on environment building, in an attempt to create a demand for literacy. New pedagogic materials, set to nationally comparable levels of learning, were specially developed. In nine months to one year districts were able to achieve complete literacy. Independent societies called Zilla Sampoon Saksharta Samitis (ZSSS) were registered at the district level, with members drawn from local NGOs, academic institutions, people’s representatives etc., and with the Collector as the Chairperson, to plan, manage and implement the programme.

Within the broad spectrum of the literacy effort, an area of critical importance was post-literacy. Without avenues to sustain the new-found literacy skills, the chances were that a neo-literate would soon relapse into illiteracy. And this would be a monumental loss -not only of finance but also of human resource and national commitment. Unlike the Total Literacy Campaign which was time bound and relatively cheap at Rs35 to 40 per learner, post-literacy could not be an inexpensive, capsuled programme.



As part of its post-literacy programme, the government had envisaged the establishment of one ‘Jana Shikshan Nilayam’ (JSN) which was a centre for continuing education serving a cluster of five villages. The centres were equipped with a few books, with musical instruments and with sports equipment. The books were selected from a prescribed list that conformed to national norms and were within the low price range of Rs3 to 6 for reasons of affordability. The quality of books consequently suffered. Around Rs3 crores were available to each district for its post-literacy programme. Some districts later planned for one centre in each village.

For the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, set up in 1991, literacy was clearly a priority. Not only was this an area of critical importance for national development, but it reflected the late Prime Minister’s own interests and concerns. By working closely with various non-governmental organisations,

individuals, institutions and government, the Foundation wished to apply its resources in areas that merited special attention. The post Total Literacy Campaign environment offered an immense opportunity to reorient the entire process of development, with a literate society that could now read and access information independently.

The Literacy Unit of the Foundation took a conscious decision to begin with a focus on post-literacy efforts. Developing good quality, interesting reading material and field-based programmes to bring books to people, were some of its first initiatives. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation began by publishing four books for rural literates in Hindi, Urdu and Telugu and providing vans to run mobile libraries to four NGOs in August 1992.

AN IDEA EMERGES

On an October afternoon in 1992, the Literacy Unit sat across the table, sharing experiences with a project partner, just after rejecting its proposal of publishing 100 books in two years for neo-literates. Both parties agreed that a mechanism for rural people that gave them access to a wide variety of books would be a more meaningful intervention than simply producing and publishing books. This could become an institution that the rural literates would sustain because it would satisfy their intellectual and creative needs, which the urban intelligentsia severely underestimated. One possible option was to set up a library serving an individual village, which could eventually evolve as an information nerve centre for the village.



Peers in the literacy movement were extremely sceptical of the idea. "It is just not viable. Where is the demand for books? Look at the government programme. The selection of books for neo-literates has to be done very carefully. They cannot be overloaded. You should not violate the "norms". The prescribed list must be followed. A self sustaining institution is difficult; not possible without government support. Surely you are not contemplating charging membership. You do not expect poor people to pay for reading books. They do not go through the collection available at the

centres. Where is the infrastructure?" These were some of the criticisms expressed about the idea of setting up village libraries.

This scepticism would need to be taken into account. With their knowledge base and experience of rural areas, the Literacy Unit decided first to undertake a pilot before launching into anything more substantial. A proposal was developed that spelled out the wider objectives of the programme. These were to:

1. Support the literacy movement by facilitating continuing education.
2. Act as a catalyst to create a reading society over time. This meant making accessible and available appropriate reading material to the literate rural population, and with special regard to the needs of the neo-literates.

In December 1992, the Executive Committee of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation approved a proposal to develop a model for a self-supporting village library. It was decided that two experimental libraries would be set up. Once, and if the model established its usefulness, it would then be replicated at a larger scale.

An important aspect of the programme was that there were no pre-conceived notions on how to go about it. The guiding belief was that irrespective of the socio-economic-cultural background, people have an innate thirst for knowledge. Therefore, the process would be as important as the outcome.

One specific output of the pilot programme was to produce an operating manual that has subsequently been further updated based on evolving roles of librarians. A set of practical and simple extension activities that assisted in sustaining literacy levels was also developed.



The obvious place to locate the libraries was the villages in the districts where literacy had been achieved and which now wished to strengthen their post-literacy programmes. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation was keen to select districts which while being comparable, offered an interesting diversity so that the feasibility of the village library concept in two starkly different situations could be assessed.

Ajmer, in Rajasthan, had to its credit one of the most cost-effective literacy campaigns. Ramanathapuram (a.k.a. Ramnad) in Tamil Nadu, then in the second phase of its Total Literacy Campaign, expressed interest in participating. They were identified as partners for the pilot. The two districts offered an interesting combination.

Ajmer, one of the better districts of Rajasthan, was riding high after a successful campaign. Delay in sanctioning the post-literacy programme by the Ministry of Human Resource Development had led to a time lag of between six and eight months between the total literacy campaign and the post-literacy campaign.

Ramnad, with the longest coast line and 'Park Strait' connecting it to Sri Lanka, was a drought-prone, poor, (and given the LTTE infiltration), high security and sensitive district. After recently completing the second and penultimate stage of its total literacy campaign, it had forwarded a proposal for post -literacy and continuing education to the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The only common element between the two districts was that they were home to some of the most revered religious places in India - Ajmer Sharif and Pushkar in Ajmer, and Rameshawaram in Ramnad.

The partner agency at the national level was a small foundation that promoted young writers. This agency was associated with a publishing house called New Age International Limited (NAIL) and was able to draw upon its resources. The current partner for the programme is New Age International.

While the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation provided conceptual and programme support, New Age International and its associated foundation extended logistics and systems support. A 'project team' or core team essentially comprised the Programme Officer of the Literacy Unit of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and the Managing Director of New Age International, who was also the head of the small foundation. A senior, retired librarian was brought in to provide technical expertise and training support, and she also guided the young librarian hired for Tamil Nadu. Senior managers from respective regional offices of New Age International handled all the logistics.



UNDERSTANDING THE FIELD REALITY

Visits to the districts were the first steps for giving substance to the idea. The team wanted the programme design to evolve after consultation and discussion with all the stakeholders - opinion builders, neo-literates and Total Literacy Campaign volunteers.

After an initial meeting in Delhi with the representatives of the ZSSS Ajmer, the first field trip was taken in February 1993. Participating in a monthly meeting of education officers, teachers, headmasters and representatives of prabharis from all the eight blocks of the district, the team discussed the programme perspective and objectives. The group endorsed the proposed approach, particularly the idea of a library becoming a self-sustaining village information centre. Selection of books was seen to be the key to the programme's success. The group concurred that books close to the reality of rural lives should be provided. Yet they admitted to a dearth of such books. The discussion led to the idea of starting a rural-based publishing programme.

Visits to the existing Jana Shikshan Nilayam Community Centres and discussion with the people in charge confirmed the oft-repeated complaint of the community not being interested in the centre. Visits to Jan Shikshan Nilayams also showed what a good information centre should not have. Books were packed in a metallic trunk or at best strung. The limited selection available was didactic, moralistic, and reformist. Because they were purchased on a tight budget, the production quality of books was substandard. The readers had minimum choice. The Centre at Ajmer was better with 50 books. Nizamabad, which came into the programme later, offered a selection of just 25 thin, unattractive books.

The few readers who came in asked for more interesting books. Another demand was for books that gave practical information. The centres had sports and music equipment which were more popular, thus relegating books completely to the rusty trunk. The walls were bare, the look gloomy. Hardly a place to inspire people who were hard pressed for time. The centre just did not have an inviting environment for reading.

With only a trunk for books and some equipment to be stored, the empty rooms, often in a corner of the village, were gradually becoming 'addas' (a place to hang out) for young men. Women found it difficult to come to the centre. During the total literacy campaign, women had been enthusiastic learners and the Jana Shikshan Nilayams were designed as fora for continuing their learning. The fact that the Jana Shikshan Nilayams, were

becoming 'male centered' was noted by the team, and this led to the evolution of specific methods for involving women.



The centre coordinators were unable to cope with their changed roles. During the campaign they had been involved with several interesting activities. Cultural jathas, padyatras, speeches - some event or the other was always taking place. They all had worked voluntarily, believing in the mission objectives. Now there was a lull. Some of them were hired as 'prabharis' or coordinators at the Jana Shikshan Nilayam. But where was the movement, they often wondered, acutely missing all the excitement and hype of the total literacy campaign. There were some fresh recruits too, who found their work uninteresting. Most of the centre coordinators were not trained in library skills and had no idea how to maintain records of books available with and borrowed from the library.

Though the total literacy campaign in Ajmer had had a presence in the entire district, for the post-literacy phase the involvement of the community was minimum. In the absence of a strong community base, it was unlikely that the centre would have run beyond the prescribed two years of support. The ZSSS, has since revised its strategy, and is now working towards making post-literacy centres self-reliant.

Community Response

Discussions were held in the evening in the villages. Women were not present, and were not called to participate as 'purdah' was an accepted practice.

On being asked whether they had visited the Jana Shikshan Nilayam, the answers were always dismissive. "We do not even know when it opens. My sons go to play, what will I do there? They have never talked about books though. Are there some books at the centre too?"

"Yes, I have seen the books but I did not feel like reading any? I would like to read about our kings, our local heroes."

“We are free in the night; we would rather sit and gossip, than go there. In any case there is no light in that room and we can barely see the books.”

“My daughter and my bahu do not go there. Have you seen the location? It is not safe for them to walk so far. And then all these youngsters play there.”

“Women are too busy.”



During initial discussions, community leaders gave vague responses. “If books are available, sure we will read. Give us whatever you like. Something which gives us ‘gyan’; ‘Achchi batein?’ Maybe, we can have some books on agriculture. Some books on our religion and culture will be good for our children.”

“Membership fee may be. But the Government centres are free.”

“No, we don’t get to see the newspaper. We cannot really afford them. You are right; we don’t get to know what is happening around us. Do we need to know? No, there really is no entertainment apart from an odd film in the city or a show organised by the Publicity Division and the radio of course.” In some villages cable television was very popular, though subject to extremely erratic power supply.

In separate one-to-one discussions with women by our female team member, they confirmed the views expressed by the elders. They expressed their preference for books on religious stories and child health.

“When people realised that the programme aimed at creating a permanent institution in their village, there was a keen interest to cooperate. They did not want life-long support, confident that they could run it eventually on their own. Inclusion of women was obliquely endorsed by the community.

In the absence of more concrete details of the Library, it was difficult for the community to visualise and react further. Given the socio cultural background of the area, it was also premature to talk about active participation of women. The team left it at that.

Ramnad is one of the more underdeveloped districts of Tamil Nadu. The fastest way to communicate with the district (in 1993) was by telex sent

through the office of the Resident Commissioner of the State in Delhi. When the team arrived in February 1993, after a two-hour drive from Madurai, Ramnad appeared to slumber along in inertia. Yet, despite the sleepy experience, Total Literacy Campaign was moving at a good pace.

Interactions with district officers were followed by visits to some villages. Discussion with learners, largely women, at their night classes, reflected their interest in a library. There was more openness to accept and understand the concept of a library and less -resistance to the idea of paying to read. People wanted books on agriculture, fisheries and religious stories. Exposure to newspapers was, as in Ajmer, severely limited and occasional.



Women's participation in the Total Literacy Campaign was notable across the country. In Ramnad too, more women had participated in the campaign than men. One reason that emerged during the discussion was that men were too embarrassed to learn. Instead, to counter the sustained pressure of the Total Literacy Campaign volunteers, they ensured that their wives attended the classes, and this then assured full participation of women.

Unlike in Rajasthan, women did not observe 'Purdah' and talking to women was not a problem. Their curiosity drew them to meetings. It was interesting to observe the social dynamics. While men persevered with an overriding concern to preserve their authority, women were becoming more articulate, confident and clear. While men spent their evening drinking and gossiping with each other, women enjoyed learning and exploring a new world which literacy had accessed for them.

In both Ramnad and Ajmer, first generation learners, especially poor women, linked literacy with work opportunities. Women also wanted books that would assist them in enhancing their household income. For the National Literacy Mission, meeting such expectations was difficult. For the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, however, in designing the programme this aspect also had to be factored in.

THE DESIGN BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

Returning from the field visits, the project team met to share experiences and sketch the outlines of what they thought a village library should look like. The first step was to list the basic tenets that would define the programme design. These were that:

- *The programme would be built around learners* preferences.*
- *The programme interventions must aim towards creating a self-reliant, independent community-managed, permanent, quality institution. -, ~^v*
- *Partnership would be of equals, with the community contributing knowledge, expertise and time, and the*
- *Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and New Age International contributing finance and technical support.*
- *There would be emphasis on participation of and decision making by women.*



The team recognised that if the programme wanted to set up a permanent institution at village-level, it had to first establish its credibility and seriousness of approach within the community. This implied that a close contact with the community was essential.

Preliminary visits had shown that the programme needed to broaden its scope, and clear pointers for how to do this were given by the community. Each library, it was felt, should offer a platform for documenting traditional wisdom and knowledge and encourage work to be written by local people. Programmes for enhancing the traditional skills of people should also be linked with the library. Learning from the experience of the Jana Shikshan Nilayams, a conscious decision of not promoting sports and music was taken. Though these would be popular and attractive to members, such activities would tend to overshadow books.

The location of the library was another critical factor. If the library was to evolve as an institution, it would have to be located in a central place in the village so that it was easily accessible, especially to women.

The village library programme was meant to inform, empower, enable and entertain a rural audience. The objectives were defined as being to:

- *Provide means for sustaining literacy.*
- *Provide a platform for upgrading livelihood, skills and practices.*
- *Promote documentation and dissemination of culture, folklore and traditions.*

Elements of a Library

In line with readers' preferences and to hold their interest, the library would have to offer a reasonably wide choice of reading material. Bearing in mind an estimated readership between 35 and 50 members and the cost implications, it was felt that books worth between Rs4000 and 5000 should be provided to each library. Thus, each library would have around 350-400 books. New books would then be added regularly.



It was important that selection of books should reflect the interests of the readers. Since the final decision of the village had been left to the ZSSS, inviting actual readers to select the books was not possible. The next best option was to request a representative of the ZSSS to come to Delhi and Chennai respectively from Ajmer and Ramnad to select the books. The team had been a witness to their close rapport with and understanding of the community. In subsequent libraries, wherever possible, book exhibitions are organised so that villagers can see and select the books. As an alternative arrangement, book lists are shared with the members.

No parameters had been set for selection of books. The representatives sourced the Children's Book Trust, the National Book Trust, the Publications Division, Sahitya Akademi, and private publishers for building a collection of titles to be considered.

Besides the books, each library would subscribe to two newspapers - one a national daily and the other a regional paper. Great care was taken to ensure that none of the reading material was communal or sensationalist.

The minimum a library could offer to its readers was a sense and feel of books, where readers could see, touch and browse through them. For the programme, it meant an open display of books, much different from the Jana Shikshan Nilayam. The most appropriate option was to have shelved iron racks. Four racks, later revised to three, are provided for displaying books. A table, chair and a small almirah were provided for the librarian's use.

The furniture too was adapted to the cultural and practical needs of the people. Librarians in Ajmer found the table and chair difficult to use. Also, it was considered rude when a younger person continued to sit while an elder person was standing. For subsequent libraries in Ajmer, 'munshi' desks were given. In most other areas, the preference is for a proper table and chair.

A pleasant ambience to attract readers is a must for a successful library. Apart from the racks for storing and displaying the books, the library was equipped with maps - World, Country, State and District - charts, clocks and quotations to create a lively space. The entire stationery needed for a library, such as membership cards, book labels, rubber stamps, etc., was provided. The local partners who were working with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to create the village library would bear the subsequent cost of stationery.



Village committees, with a mandatory representation of women, were set up to run and manage the libraries. This was also important to ensure sustainability of the programme. To further ensure their participation in the programme, women were identified to be trained as librarians.

The programme insisted on a professional, simple system of library support. Simplifying a complex world of library science to the level of a village person was a challenging task. There was no precedent to go by, no reference material to provide guidance.

At the same time, cost was an important factor, as the model, if successful, would then be replicated at a larger scale. Yet, the quality and

durability of the books was something that could not be compromised. An attempt was made to ensure that minimum financial investment was required. For the pilot libraries, the first year's cost worked out to Rs 20,000 followed by around Rs 4000 for the second year. Based on increased costs and widening the programme's outreach, the budget is regularly revised.

Discussions with the community and the total literacy campaign workers had highlighted the need to make available books written from a rural perspective for a rural audience. Up until now, rural areas were flooded with information and material emanating from urban areas; so establishing a two-way information flow was essential. The vast reservoir of wisdom and knowledge in India's villages had largely remained untapped.

The community and the partner agency in Ajmer had supported the idea of publishing books written by rural people. As an experiment, the team proposed that Author Workshops for both the districts be scheduled simultaneously with setting up the libraries.

Training programmes for improving existing skills of the people was another activity that was within the mandate of a library as an information centre. Discussions with the community on the sort of skill training programmes that should be organised were started a little while after the libraries were set up.

Looking at the Issue of Self Reliance



The programme was worked out on the assumption that two years would be sufficient time for the processes to be developed for the libraries to become self-reliant. An underlying concern was to identify ways for achieving this aim. Membership would be one obvious way. The other options would need to be located within the programme design. Skill training programmes would enhance the income of the readers, a part of which they could then contribute to the library. Also, a fee would be charged for giving training.

Publishing of locally developed books was the other possible option. The Total Literacy Campaign districts, especially, offered a potential market for books for neo-literates. The team proposed that the library/district and the author would both share a percentage of the royalty earned on sale of books with the village library.

For fund raising at the village level, ideas mooted included selling of newspapers and old damaged books. After two to three years when the start-up support would be withdrawn, the library should have built up a small balance of its own which would provide a cushion to carry it forward even if it had not quite achieved self-sufficiency at that time. Seeing the enthusiasm of the village, the team felt that people would be able to raise their own resources to continue the programme.

FROM PRECEPTS TO PRACTICE

For both the pilot programme libraries, decisions to finalise the villages where they would be located were left to the respective ZSSS. However, two considerations were stressed: villages should have sufficient number of literate families and the community should show an interest in the programme. Another consideration was that the villages should be in the interior and not close to the road. As it transpired, in both the districts the team had not visited the villages selected. However, the ZSSS had conducted initial meetings in both the villages.

The libraries in both the districts were established almost simultaneously-March 1993 in Ajmer, and April 1993 in Ramnad. The experiences of both the districts mutually enriched the programme. Though the profiles of the two districts were different in many respects as were the ways in which the libraries were established, like membership, use of space, arguments and apprehensions of the villagers, their reactions were similar. Also similar, endearingly similar, was the sense of awe followed by joy at the sight of so many books, with even those people who could not read or write flipping through them.



In Ajmer the district had selected Beeti, a small village of 125 families with saline agricultural land in the interior of Panchayat Samiti Silora, which had mainly Purohit families. Many adult males worked in the town or surrounding industries, leaving behind an older generation fiercely protective of their daughters-in-law. 'Purdah' was an accepted practice. The village was considered ideal in many respects. Nobody drank or played cards in the village. Barring a few stray incidents, there had been no major incidences of violence. The literacy statistics were prominently displayed on one side of the temple wall. The Sarpanch from the village was active and lobbied with the ZSSS to be part of the programme.

In Ramnad, the district had selected Ucilankatuvalsai - a poor, remote village. A small village of around 100 families, Valsai was strikingly beautiful with its orange sandy 'kutcha' roads and rich green trees. As the team reached the village for the first time; it saw the residents climbing on to a bus. An old man had died and most of the adults were going for the funeral. Even in those circumstances,, they showed their concern for the programme. On seeing the team, they got off and spent some time discussing the programme and promised their support.

No newspapers had reached either Beeti or Valsa before the establishment of the village library.

In Ramnad, as also in PMT which came into the programme later, the team received petitions and requests from villages ranging from pension difficulties to problem with the roads, to admissions, etc. on its first few visits. This continued despite the team's categorical refusal to react to any of the requests. Maybe it was the name of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation that led people to believe that it could influence the Administration. Over time, when people realised that the Foundation's role, mandate and the programme, were not political the petitions stopped on their own accord.



Working out the Modalities

Under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana development funding programme in Ajmer, a single room for housing the 'Jan Jagran Kendras' had been

constructed by the district administration in the compound of a primary school. The library was housed in the same building.

In Valsai, as no public building was available, a room was rented in the middle of the village while meetings were conducted in the verandah of the temple. Discussing the problems of a building, the village pledged a part of their common land for the library. Seeking support for construction material, they agreed to contribute free labour. After a year or so the community moved the library to a thatched structure on the common land. However, they have not yet been able to raise not funds for the construction of a 'pucca' building.

At a village meeting held in the porch of the library next to the primary school in Beeti, the same arguments as during the first field visit were given. The daughters-in-law would not visit the library. Yet, the young unmarried girls or widowed women living with their parents, i.e. women who were born in the village, were allowed to visit the library.

The team reasoned out with the elders that a woman visiting the library, interacting with the librarian (most often another woman) and making her choice from the selection of books, would be more of an asset to her family and hence to society at large, than a woman denied access to knowledge. The suggestion to have separate timings for men and women was well accepted. Despite agreeing to such an arrangement, visits of women to the library remain few in Ajmer. Nevertheless, they access books either through their children, or discuss their choice with the librarian.

In Valsai, men assured their full cooperation in ensuring women's participation. It was their own involvement that they could not commit. Their patronising stand conveyed the message, "You want to do something good. We will ensure that you do not come across any problems. We have no time for reading and learning and we are fine. Women need to improve their intelligence."

In both the villages, people agreed that the library should be open for two hours each day in the morning and in the evening. The timings matched the convenience of the readers. They also agreed upon an honorarium for the librarian.



The other contentious issue related to the use of space. The team proposed that the library should not become a reading centre. Readers could come, select the book and leave. Lack of space dictated such an arrangement. Following this dictum was also important as like some Jana Shikshan Nilayams the library too could become an ‘Adda’ and deter women from using it.

However, a very valid point was raised. “What about the newspaper which cannot be issued to individual members?” A consensus was reached that newspapers were to be kept at a commonly visited place. It could be the ‘chaupal’, the library porch or the temple, but not inside the library.

The community was initially reluctant to pay any membership subscription to the library. “None of the other ‘schemes’ charged any money. And given our meagre income, it would be difficult for us to cooperate. Also, we won’t have any control over the fee collected,”

The objective of the programme was discussed afresh. The library started with external financial support which is not endless. To sustain this effort, the library would have to raise money from within the community, which would be deposited in the bank for two years. This account would be operated by only the librarian and the village representative.

The second issue related to the level of the membership fees. The leaders reluctantly discussed the money they spent on their smokes or films or alcohol every month. In comparison, a contribution for a library that would remain with them for some time to come was insignificant. Finally the community felt that a membership of Rs2 every month or Rs20 for a year was a reasonable amount.

The Librarians’ Training

Simple practical systems for library management were developed and refined over several visits by Ms L Sivarammaya, a richly experienced retired librarian who was a member of the core team. A training capsule was developed that dealt with: processing of books (labelling, etc.); accession

and issue methods (numbering, due date slips); general maintenance of the library with rules and regulations.



The manual that was developed was more comprehensive than the actual training, in order to accommodate future expansion of the village library programme. It was designed as a reference book to be used after the training had been received as a guide for running the library. The manual since then has been further revised and updated, based on the field experience, the requirement's indicated from actually running a library and inputs given by the field partners.

Simplified further both in language and content, the revised manual also discusses the concept of the library, and respective roles of the librarian, village library committee and the field agencies.

Pushpa, a young widow in her teens, who had studied till fifth grade was selected as the librarian in Beeti, Ajmer. The first shock for Ms Sivarammayya, the trainer, was the realisation that her trainee did not know what a book is and had not seen a 'story' book. She began by explaining differences between books, newspapers' series and so on. Next she talked about how a book was produced - role of author, publisher, book seller. Gradually and patiently, the discussion veered to accession, issue of books and recruitment of members.

Taking a little breather from her trainee, Ms Sivarammayya joined the discussion with the community that was going on outside in the verandah. Seeing her, the people took out money for membership fees. She was in a fix. She was trying to work out basic systems and could not give the books away till their processing was over. Yet, seeing their enthusiasm she did not want to refuse. Understanding her dilemma, people paid their fee and agreed to take the books after the 'paper work' was over. Before she realised, she had enrolled 20 members there and then.

At the end of the day the team was a little sceptical of Pushpa's ability to cope with the work. She was not used to writing and was taking painfully long to record details of one book.

Next day Pushpa's excitement and interest was palpable.

Till yesterday, life for this young widow was passing by without any purpose. Now she had a challenge ahead of her. The transformation of Pushpa from a shy, unsure, diffident girl to a confident, mature manager merits a separate case study. Four years later she is a little impatient. She has studied till class eight and wants to do her tenth. She wants to get out of her village and wishes for a job with the 'government'.

In Valsai, the village had appointed two librarians, a young boy and a girl to interact with men and women respectively. A happy outcome and a good omen for the programme was that the two married each other a few months later.

The question that came up next was naming the library. This was also important for creating a distinct identity among the users. In Ajmer, the title 'Jan Jagran Kendra' was retained and was qualified with 'sponsored/supported by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation'¹. The names were painted on the walls in blue. Since this conveyed a sense of local ownership! the format was adopted for libraries in other districts too.

Ramnad did not have any post-literacy centres, and the libraries were called Rajiv Gandhi Rural Library, followed by the name of the village. Once the post-literacy centres took off, the names were changed in Ramnad too. Special boards, white on blue, were prepared for each library.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clearly listed the responsibilities of various parties was drafted in mutual consultation and signed between the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and the local agency. A number of committees at the village, block and district levels were proposed. The first version of the MoU included committed people who were associated from the beginning, as patrons. The MoU (cf. Appendix 2) for the programme since then has been revised and made more comprehensive. It is now a tripartite agreement between the local agency, New Age International and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation.



Launch Functions

Formal events, well covered by the media, marked the launch of the two libraries. The launch functions were used to garner support for the programme. Invitation letters had been sent to selected districts and agencies. In Aimer, the chief guest, the President of Sahitya Kala Academi and other people from Delhi could not attend due to freak weather conditions in June 1993. The training manual and the book on veterinary care Pashudhan ki Dekhbhal developed by the local people were also released.

Valsai was overwhelmed with the presence of a former cabinet minister and MP at the launch function held in July 1993. A set of new books was gifted to the library. Excitement, emotions and gaiety marked the occasion. Since then, in Ramnad it has become a practice to formally launch a library, often by the village elders. It is always a jubilant event with songs, speeches, ribbon cutting, unveiling the board, lighting the lamp, decorations.

Author Workshops

For the proposal on rural publishing, the response in Ajmer was positive. Ramnad agreed to the merit of the idea but would not commit to serious writing.

The sixty odd participants in the workshop held in Ajmer soon after the library was set up, comprised teachers, doctors, village elders, volunteers, etc. Themes for writing included fiction; biography, folklore/mythology; educational/informational material, with emphasis on traditional wisdom; and handbooks for village level workers with personal anecdotes.

Aspiring authors arrived with their manuscripts and made brief presentations in their respective groups. Based on comments received on the theme, content, interest value, style and overall treatment of the manuscript, the authors then revised their manuscripts. Resource persons with publishing experience facilitated individual group discussions.

As expected, the writing required much improvement. The manuscripts discussed were mainly do-good, simplistic stories or a compilation of fact sheets on various schemes and productive skills. From a total of 35 manuscripts, nine were short listed for further development.

A book on traditional systems of veterinary care was the first book published. It was edited and validated rigorously to ensure that the practices listed did not have any negative side effect on animals. Local artists worked on the illustrations and layout. The book was well accepted by the readers. Reputable NGOs conducting training in animal husbandry, also found it useful for the orientation of farmers.

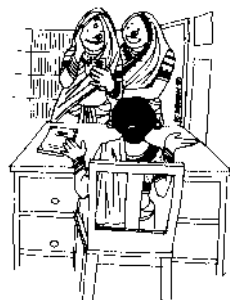
However, the publishing programme could not maintain its momentum. This aspect of the programme is discussed later.

CONSOLIDATING THE BASE

Initial readership surveys indicated a preference for mythologies and biographies. Contrary to popular belief, adults loved comics, while children would pore over the newspapers. Frequent visits to the library facilitated close follow up and immediate problem solving, thus enabling the libraries to become functional and operate smoothly within a month.

Within the first two weeks, around 60 families had become members of each library, and between 15 and 20 books were being circulated every day. Now that the pilot libraries were running well, it was important to understand the dynamics involved when up scaling the programme. Both Ramnad and Ajmer were requested to identify suitable villages for programme expansion.

In one of the first few initial visits to Ajmer, the team in enthusiasm had discussed setting up of 350 libraries. The full cost and policy implications sunk in later. At Rs 20,000 per library, it meant an investment of Rs 70,00,000. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation would virtually be taking over a major chunk of the district's programme, whereas the programme objective lay in establishing a model and encouraging other agencies to replicate it. The ZSSS meanwhile, taking this figure as a firm commitment, had sought and received the State government's approval for signing the MoU for 350 libraries.



The issue was discussed at the General Body meeting of the ZSSS where the core team was invited. The team presented its view point that such a large expansion based on the experience of one library was unwise, and also implied duplication of resources. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, instead, proposed to fully support 25 libraries as a logical next step in establishing the viability of the concept. The progress of the libraries and the programme would be monitored and compared with ZSSS centres. If the libraries proved to be more effective than ZSSS centres, further expansion could be pursued. The members present unanimously agreed to this proposal.

With a view to try the model in different socio-economic conditions within the district, the ZSSS identified villages in all the eight blocks of the district. Though villages within a block were close, the total area to be covered was vast. A supervisor had to be appointed for the programme.

Six months later, when the programme had proved its effectiveness, the ZSSS proposed that the model be adopted for one entire block 'Masooda' which was among the under-developed blocks of Ajmer. This meant setting up of more than 100 libraries. In consultation with the Education Secretary, Government of Rajasthan, cost sharing between ZSSS and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation was worked out.

The ZSSS at the same time had begun to appreciate the self-reliance approach of the programme. It introduced membership fee in all 'kendras' in the district and training for all prabharis of the district was held as per the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation module. Today, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation collaborates with the ZSSS Ajmer, the single largest programme partner, for 140 libraries in the district.

In Ramnad, a cluster of ten libraries was identified in the same block as Valsai, within a radius of 10-15 kms. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation began a dialogue with the district to share a part of the expenses from its budget for post-literacy work. Studying the proposal forwarded to the National Literacy Mission, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation showed various sources from where funds could be allocated to the library programme. After lengthy

discussions, the ZSSS agreed to make a one-time contribution of Rs 5000 per library for further expansion. 65 libraries in as many villages are supported by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation today.

Essential Components of the Library

125 families living in the village; this- criterion not applicable to hill areas

Independent building: well lit, secure, accessible to women; local responsibility to arrange a place

Lending Library opened for a few hours - time decided by the village

Around 400 books

Books added regularly

Two newspapers daily

Membership fee

Post office bank account - joint

- Amounts collected not touched for two to three years:

Open display

Quality furniture

Fixtures - clock, maps, charts, rules, slogans.

Library systems

Librarians' training

Refresher training

Librarians preferably women

Honorarium paid to the librarian as decided by the agency/readers.

Name of the library

Board

Rajiv Gandhi Foundation support for two to three years.

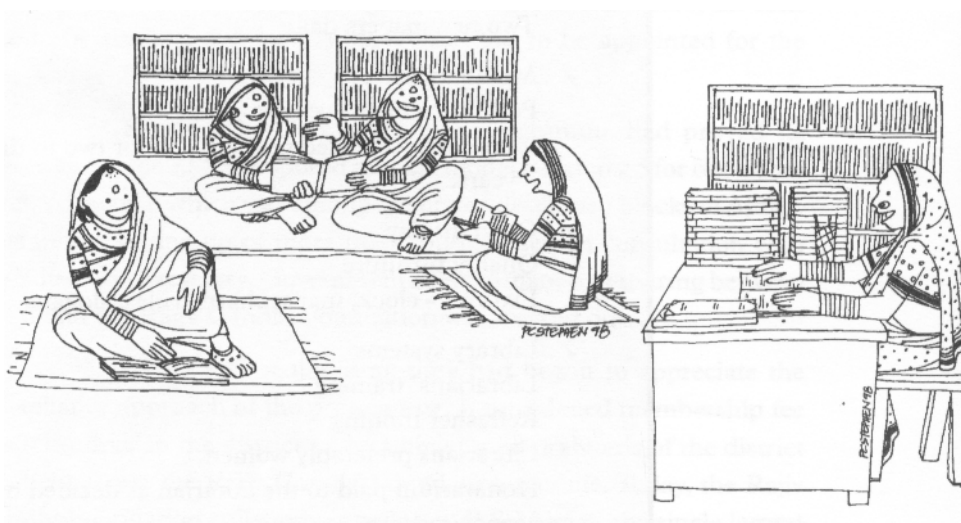
Publishing programmes - Royalty to be shared with the district/library

Skill training programmes - Fees to be charged sharing profits



3

EXPANDING THE PROGRAMME



With functional libraries in around 40 villages of the two districts, the next step was to gradually extend the programme to other areas. With their mandate and influence in a district, the ZSSSs were natural partners for the programme. At the same time, collaboration with NGOs was also encouraged. Enjoying closer rapport with the community and with quicker decision making, if NGOs became local partners, they might give a more participatory dimension to the programme.

Within a broad framework, the partner could adapt the model to a local situation. For example, the membership fee, the librarians' honorarium, timings, etc. were at the discretion of the community and the local agency. Flexibility in the model was also necessary as village libraries were a small part of the district's overall post-literacy programme or of an NGO's various initiatives. In Durg and Faridkot, therefore, the librarians do not receive any money, while in West Bengal it is only Rs50/- per month. Organisational parity had to be maintained. Else, it could lead to greater dissonance and isolation of the programme, as it would have happened for example if the

ZSSSs were not paying any honorarium to the 'centre in charge' and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation paid its librarian.



The experience in Ajmer and Ramnad had taught the value of working in a contiguous area, within a radius of 10 to 15 kms. Though each village has its unique character and dynamics, a cluster approach enables adaptation of the model in a largely homogeneous environment and optimises impact. A cluster is easier to monitor as well. Experience also showed that libraries should be set up in clusters often and in exceptional cases, of five villages.

While it was important that the spread of the programme within a district be contiguous, it soon became apparent that the districts, selected should also be geographically close to each other in order to facilitate programme coordination. For example, the training of the librarians, the selection of books, workshops and supervision could all be organised collectively. This approach is reflected in the selection of project districts: Nainital - Almora; Gorakhpur - Deoria; Ramnad - PMT

Some Elements of the Process and the Division of Responsibilities

Gauge interest of the agency - RGF

Consider geographic spread - RGF

Work out cost sharing. RGF-/LA

Pilot before expansion - RGF/LA

Identify a cluster of villages - LA

Share programme profile with villages - LA

Identify suitable rooms - LA

Visit area - RGF/LA/NA

Conduct village meeting - RGF/ LA/NA

Inspect buildings - RGF/ LA/NA

Discussion with partner agency - RGF
Book selection (through exhibitions/sending lists) - NA/LA
Arrangements for furniture, fixtures - NA/LA
Arrange delivery - NA
Identify librarians - LA/NA
Identify supervisor - LA/NA
Collect baseline information about selected villages - NA/LA
Signing of MoUs - RGF/LA/NA
Librarians' training - NA/RGF/LA
Setting up libraries - NA/LA/RGF
Filling in data sheets - LA/NA
Author workshops - RGF/NA
Skill training workshops - RGF/LA/NA
Additional books - RGF/LA/NA
Refresher training - NA/LA/RGF
Monitoring and supervision - NA/LA/RGF
Follow up -RGF/NA/LA
Programme support - RGF/LA
RGF - Rajiv Gandhi Foundation
LA - Local Agency
NA - National Agency

Once an agency expresses interest, a conceptual note on the programme along with a comprehensive cost package is given to the agency.

The partner agency is encouraged to pick up the recurring costs. The approach is always to start with a pilot. Only when the programme is fine-tuned to the local needs and environment and accepted by the people, should scaling up be considered. In Durg, the programme was started in 20 villages. Seeing the positive response of the readers and committed support of the local agency, the programme was expanded and is currently operational in 70 villages.

The local agency is requested to identify villages in a cluster and a place in each village, specially earmarked for the library. The local agency or field

partner should then discuss the broad framework of the programme with the community to gauge their level of participation. Only villages that show a positive response are selected.

A reconnaissance visit to the area by the project team is essential. Sitting face to face with the local implementing agency, programme details, which at first instances appear unnecessary, can be explained. A rapport with the local team is established. For the programme's sustain ability, the local agency's correct understanding of the philosophy, goals and objectives of the programme is critical to ensure that the same ethos is carried through to the villages.

Interaction with the community during village meetings enables a better understanding of readers' preferences, suggests possible adaptations to the village library model and gauges likely interest in the programme. A socio-cultural feel of the area helps in identifying possible themes for the publishing programme and skills training programme.

Finding a suitable building is the responsibility of the local partners even where the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation is meeting the entire expenditure of setting up the village library. An equally important objective of the visit is to examine the proposed buildings to ensure whether they are centrally located, accessible to women, well lit, and secure.

Once the partnership is confirmed, the national agency (New Age International) arranges what books and furniture will need to be supplied in consultation with the local agency. When entering a district for the first time, a collection of books is exhibited to enable readers to make a selection. The national agency organises the librarian's training and makes the libraries operational.

After the book selection process, furniture, sets of hooks, library stationery (that includes registers, membership cards, stamps), and other accessories such as maps, clocks and charts, are supplied to each library. The local agency helps in sourcing the material.



A schedule of activities that includes refresher training, author workshops, skill training and addition of new books is worked out with the collaborating agencies. Follow up visits ensure that programme objectives are being met and extension activities are added to the programme.

A supervisor is appointed for a cluster of 20 villages through the national agency. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation monitors the programme and collates information on the usage and performance of each library, and thereby continuously develops an extensive data base.

Exploring Partnerships

Expansion of the village library programme from the initial pilots was often based on word-of-mouth; pro-active initiatives and plain coincidences. The programme moved to other areas in early 1994. Though envisaged as a scheme for post-literacy districts, seeing the confidence, commitment and enthusiasm generated by the libraries, requests for partnerships in non Total literacy districts were also encouraged. The selection of actual states and districts for establishing libraries was primarily based on the credibility, interest and commitment of each local partner agency.

The ZSSS Nizamabad approached the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and a dialogue was initiated in September 1993. By January 1994 three model libraries were set up in the district. The initial enthusiasm of the ZSSS soon waned. In the absence of any feedback, the programme was almost withdrawn, and then the ZSSS showed a renewed interest and 25 libraries on a cost-sharing basis were opened in September

1995. When the Additional District Magistrate of Ajmer took charge as District Magistrate of Banswara, one of the more underdeveloped districts of Rajasthan, he invited the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to start the programme in the district. The team was sceptical, as literacy levels were very low and Total Literacy Campaign there was in its initial phase. However, in Garhi Block of the district, Lok Jumbish was running its programme and 5 libraries were set up with their field support in July 1994.

The Andhra Pradesh Milk Federation had shown interest in the book on veterinary care, 'Pashudahan ki Dekhbhal' and was keen to establish libraries as one of its extension activities. Though the partnership could not take off, the Andhra Pradesh Milk Federation mentioned the programme to West Bengal Milk Federation who then approached the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation for collaboration with their Women's Dairy Cooperative Project. The initial proposal of establishing 150 libraries in one go is being implemented in phases. In July 1994 the first nine libraries were set up in three districts with support of the respective milk unions; the programme is currently operational in 65 villages in seven districts and 30 more libraries are in the pipeline for this year (1997).



In Haridwar, an organisation of journalists was keen to take up the programme. The District Collector supported the group and had raised funds from local industries and 'Ashrams' for the project. Though the proposal was for ten libraries, given the resources available, only four libraries were setup in July 1994. Haridwar did not have a Total literacy campaign but had a large literate population.

NGOs from District PMT which neighboured Ramnad, showed interest in the programme. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation on its own initiative was in touch with the district authorities for a post-literacy programme in the area. In the absence of a response from the authorities a youth-based NGO was identified as the programme partner.

A small NGO in Agra was running a library as one of its major activities. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation's support enabled it to set up five more in neighbouring villages, in April 1994. Later the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation approached the ZSSS Agra to support the programme but did not receive any response.

In Uttar Pradesh, the programme has developed successful partnerships with NGOs in seven districts. A NGO in District Almora approached the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation but had the capacity to handle eight to ten libraries. Appreciating the importance of cluster approach, the NGO discussed the programme with other organisations in the area. At present, seven NGOs are running 68 libraries in Nainital and Almora.

In Lucknow, two NGOs are running 15 libraries. The NGOs in Gorakhpur and Deoria, cover 21 libraries between them.

Partnerships with the ZSSSs have continued in Durg, Madhya Pradesh; Faridkot, Punjab; and Jharsuguda, Orissa. Extending into North East, libraries have been set up in association with a NGO in Assam. Recent initiatives include collaborations with NGOs in Patna and Mussorie.



The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has adapted the model for establishing slum libraries in Delhi. The number of books is enhanced, given the larger number of users. The Foundation is also developing a similar model in Calcutta.

KEY COMPONENTS OF PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Dealing with a diverse range of partners, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation first tries to understand the different ideologies, styles and pace of each agency. This helps in understanding how the agency will link the programme to its other activities.

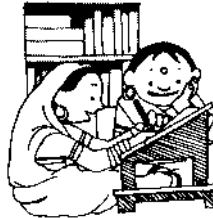
The programme is a combined effort of three agencies, viz. the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the national support agency and the local implementing agency. It is important that they all work in tandem. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation maintains a close contact with the field to ensure smooth coordination and that the process is responsive to problem solving. Close interaction between all three partners ensures that the implementation is in consonance with the programme principles and objectives. The Foundation achieves this through field visits, frequent exchange of letters with local agencies and feedback from the national partner. A few examples would illustrate the diverse range of issues.

In UP Hills, the agency that had taken the lead in the area had made a single bank account for all the ten libraries together. A part of the amount was also used for purchase of books. As this was against the rules, the NGO was asked to replace the amount and open separate accounts for each library.

The annual membership fee in Jharsugda, Orissa was Rs20. The ZSSS felt that members did not have the capacity to pay the full amount. As one of its contributions to the programme, the ZSSS committed to pay Rs15 while the members paid the balance. The apprehensions for such an arrangement have come true as the ZSSS has not fulfilled its side of the agreement.

As it has an overview of the programme, the Foundation shares and promotes cross-fertilisation of ideas among different regions. Consequently the programme is being constantly enriched and evolved. The mandate for

the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation includes promoting and popularising the programme. Fund raising is another important activity. In the past, the Ministry of Human Resource Development gave a one-time corpus support and the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research gave a small grant. Efforts are on to attract private sponsors and other support, both in India and abroad.



To facilitate programme management, coordination and monitoring, the RGF has developed a data base that contains library details. Information collected include profiles of each village and librarian, membership details, and the circulation of books. Libraries have been grouped in clusters. Each library and each cluster is required to submit annual reports. The responsibility rests with the librarian and the supervisor respectively. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation invested substantial time in developing the process, and finalised the systems after thorough field testing and receiving feedback from field partners and librarians.

The national agency (New Age International) reimburses local agencies every quarter. These expenses, in turn, are reimbursed every quarter to New Age International by Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. The supervision costs were also included in the quarterly reimbursement. As this was leading to blockage of significant amounts of money for New Age International, the arrangement was changed, and RGF is now paying the supervision costs as advance.

FIELD PARTNERS

The partner agency should have a strong presence in the area through any of its existing development activities and programmes. A close contact and rapport with the local community implies that a communication channel already exists and problem solving mechanisms are in place. Absence of such basic linkages result in a scenario where the agency is unaware of the field dynamics and the community has no access to the agency for discussing various issues.

In Haridwar where the initial interest and response of both the agency and the community for the programme were heart-warming, the libraries after nearly three years, will be moved to another location and then with another agency. The first agency, comprising many journalists and litterateurs, did not devote enough time to ensure that the programme stabilised. Consequently, while two libraries struggled along on their own steam, the other two ran out of energy and eventually came to a grinding halt.



The mistake here essentially lay in the identification of the agency. Though excited by the concept, the members had no experience of running a field programme. Nor did they make time for close liaison and follow up with the libraries since they were set up in order to deal with problems as they emerged. True to media ilk, it was a good story for a few months, and was then summarily dropped.

A 'well known' environmentalist was pursuing the Foundation to start the programme with her NGO based in Almora. When the libraries were launched in UP Hills, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation invited her agency to participate. She instead recommended a new community-based organisation, a spin off of one of her projects. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation signed the Memorandum of Understanding with this small NGO.

A few months later when a review team went to visit the project, it discovered that no such organisation existed at the address given. The phone number given was of a Public Call Office, and no libraries existed in the area. The lady admitted that this small NGO had embezzled funds from another project too. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation had yet not signed the Memorandum of Understanding with this small NGO when this incident occurred. The minimum gesture she could have made was warning the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Now the libraries are being moved, but neither the NGO nor the lady has responded to the Foundation's queries. Again the mistake lay in working with an agency that was too small and had no community support.

Any programme is influenced by the leadership and the personalities involved. However, change in leadership of the partner organisation or in project personnel should not lead to complete reversal of agreed strategies or

any slowing down of momentum. While it is always true that village libraries will not be the only programme being run by the agency, simultaneously creating an independent 'space' in the organisation for running the programme is important. If relegated as one of the sundry activities, chances are the programme will never realise its full potential.

A strong core team in the field is needed to maintain programme continuity and carry forward the long-term vision. An effective team would make the processes part of the system, so that despite change in the composition of the team or leadership, the programme would retain its essence. It works as a nodal point for interaction with the field, the national partner agency and the Foundation.



The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation's role lies in lobbying the leadership, especially when it changes, and in ensuring that a dedicated team is available for the programme.

After the demise of its Secretary, the NGO in Agra began to lose interest in the programme. The librarians in a General Body Meeting decided to start a separate outfit and requested Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to transfer the programme to this new unit. Rajiv Gandhi Foundation could not accede to their request, as it can collaborate only with registered agencies. Also these libraries have received support for more than three years and the Foundation plans to withdraw from the area.

As with most of the ZSSSs, the interest of the Collector influences the momentum of the programme. In Nizamabad and in Ramnad, performance levels swung with the involvement of the Collector. On the other hand, Ajmer has seen five and Durg two Collectors respectively since the programme started. To the credit of the core project teams that have remained unchanged, the programme continues to retain its dynamism, despite the changes in local leadership.

THE AGENCY ASSOCIATED AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

An agency at the national level, New Age International, assists the Foundation in implementing the programme by providing logistic and

supervision support. It ensures that the libraries are set up as per the agreed schedule and coordinates author workshops and skill training programme.

Once a consensus was reached between the ZSSS, and Rajiv Gandhi Foundation about the cost sharing, the setting up of 106 libraries (three libraries had been set up under the first expansion) in Massoda in the shortest possible time was a challenge. Training was conducted in batches with the help of master trainers over a fortnight. The Block was divided into three clusters. One library in each cluster was fully set up and training was conducted in the library itself. The national agency acted fast in arranging delivery of books, furniture and other material. With the help of the Assistant Project Officers (APOs) of the ZSSS, 106 libraries were set up and made operational in one month.



Some early considerations dictated the choice and nature of the national partner. The national agency should have a strong financial base. New Age International, for the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, meets all financial commitments, including librarians' honorariums and newspapers, as per the Memorandum of Understanding with respective agencies. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation reimburses New Age International every quarter. The national agency needs to have a network of regional offices to enable closer monitoring and supervision. Regional offices of New Age International maintain day-to-day contact with the field agencies for better coordination.

Having a core team is just as important for the national agency as for the field partner. Logistics and administrative systems should be well in place as their smooth functioning has a direct influence on the programme. For example, delayed payments to librarians de-motivates them; when books do not reach on time, the members lose interest.

As mentioned in the first section, the project was conceived and piloted with an associated foundation of the publishing house and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with this foundation. As the programme grew, both financial and human resources of the parent company were drawn upon through an internal arrangement. However, the unfortunate demise of the Managing Director of New Age

International in July 1996, who was heading both the company and the foundation, led to virtual closure of the foundation. The Memorandum of Understanding had to be redrafted and renegotiated with the parent company. This situation led to some confusion and chaos in the field, as payments could not be released on time.

The programme suffered further loss when one of the key members, passed away in December 1996 during a visit to Ajmer. The regional teams were in place, but a vacuum was created at the national level.

Though, new people from within the parent company have been assigned to handle the programme, their perceptions and visions are yet to be built up. The administrative system is well in place and is functioning smoothly.



With the growing reach of the programme, dependence on one national partner despite its regional presence, centralises the whole operation and often delays responses. By the time the second round of the contract with New Age International ends in 1998, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation hopes to regionalise the programme and identify new partners who will preferably be NGOs.

Supervision

The supervisors appointed by the national agency work closely with the libraries and the community. Their tasks include coordination, monitoring, community contact, and ensuring regular feedback. They are expected to identify and promote other extension activities - skills training, publishing, and any other ventures that could strengthen the library. Selected in consultation with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and the local agency, the supervisors are graduates/postgraduates with experience in development work.

By visiting the libraries regularly, the supervisors sort out the day-to-day problems with the help of the village library committee and the local agency. Major problems, if any, are brought to the attention of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and New Age International for quick redressal. Supervisors send

quarterly feedback on the performance of the libraries and the local agency through New Age International.

Supervisors are important players that link the librarian, the local partner and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation on the one hand, as also New Age International and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation on the other. A meeting of all the supervisors was held in January 1996, to discuss the programme. They used the opportunity to share their experiences and review strategies to address problems common to all the areas.

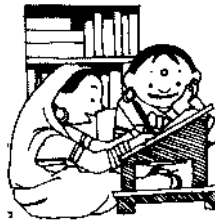
Both the local partner and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation were closely involved in programme implementation in Ajmer. As the programme grew, it became difficult to continue with such a support system. The librarians on the other hand, missed a link that could advise them and assist in community mobilisation. They also needed help in maintaining the systems.

The programme recognised that a local person was needed to work closely with the librarians. They decided that one person on a cluster comprising fifteen to twenty libraries would be recruited. The national agency recruited the supervisors.



There were situations when the number of libraries being run with an agency was small, nor did the agency have the capacity to scale up the number, making it unviable to maintain a separate person as supervisor. For future expansion of the programme, it was decided that within a district or contiguous districts the total number of libraries between different agencies should be sufficient to have a separate supervisor.

In Haridwar and Agra the number of libraries per agency was small and the two districts were not on the same route. Consequently, supervision of the programme suffered. In Banswara, though the number was small, the agency had its own feedback mechanism, ensuring a strong follow-up. After subsequent expansion of the programme, a full-time supervisor is now in place in Banswara. In Lucknow, two agencies share a supervisor over fifteen libraries in total. One supervisor handles twenty libraries in Deoria and Gorakhpur. ZSSS Ajmer shares the cost of supervision, while ZSSS, Durg continues to use its own system.



4

LEARNING BY DOING

Over four years, (not a long time for a development initiative) since the first library was launched, the programme has continuously evolved in response to field experience. It has been a process of learning, a process of trial and error.

Divided into three subsections, this section, discusses the important elements of the programme, and how each element evolved.

I Systems Aspects

This section discusses infrastructure issues, both human and physical, such as books, librarian, training, library systems, space and extension activities.

BOOKS

Books are the life force of the programme. Constant infusion of fresh titles is important to retain the interest of the reader. Based on readers' feedback, the programme tries to ensure that unpopular books are taken off the list and are not forwarded to new libraries being set up.

Interestingly, irrespective of geographical location, readers particularly enjoy books on mythology and religion. Special favourites continue to be thin, colourful, well-illustrated books. After religion, the most popular books are stories, adaptations of classics, poetry and biographies. Books giving practical information on agriculture or any other skill and also dictionaries are found useful. As an on-going effort to tailor the library collection to readers' tastes, a list of titles found uninteresting is being compiled.

After a long haul in Rajasthan, working in the villages of West Bengal, it was a pleasant surprise when women requested for classics and serious

works of literature. The literary awareness, a characteristic feature of West Bengal, was in sharp contrast to other states. As the books requested were more expensive, the allocation for the purchase of books in West Bengal was raised.

Interestingly, readers in West Bengal had selected a whole lot of titles on health issues, one of these being AIDS. On one of its programme support visits, a librarian complained in shy undertones to the women in the team that the readers felt the library was promoting obscene books. After much discussion, she agreed that the readers had selected the book themselves and, yes, AIDS was an issue about which readers should learn.

In the first lot of books that had gone to Beeti, a book on beauty care had been packed as an extra by a kind publisher. A couple of visits later, the first request the librarian made to the team was, “Some pages of the book on beauty care are torn. Women are asking for it every day. Can you please send another copy?”

Inadvertently, some popular books on Rajasthan’s culture and folklore were sent to Durg. A part of Chattisgarh belt, Durg enjoyed a culturally rich history. Readers did not favour these books which were not relevant locally.



In early days, readers were overwhelmed at the sight of ‘so many books’. While making or commenting on the first selection, their exposure was limited. The choices in the market too, were limited. Recent years have seen a welcome increase in the number of titles being published for a rural audience, perhaps an attempt by the publishers to capture this growing market.

In Ramnad, alcoholism among men is a major problem. Women were inspired after reading about the anti-arack movement in Andhra Pradesh, and can now argue with men. Widow remarriages are not an accepted practice in Ramnad. After reading a book on the subject, a young widow gained confidence. Though criticised and chastised, the young woman got married again with the support of other women from the village.

After consultation with the community and the local agency, a decision was taken that text books, guides and magazines would not be kept in the

library. Books for students may limit the library's use to the young and school-going population. It was important for the library to first reach out to all age groups and consolidate its position.



This was not a mandatory requirement and, based on the field demands, many libraries have now added text books to the collection. Libraries in Lucknow have added curriculum books, donated by schools, which they lend to students at a nominal fee. In Ramnagar, books and periodicals preparing youth for competitive exams are subscribed to by the library.

As the reading habits develop, preferences change too. Yet, mythology still remains the biggest draw, especially in the north, while the programme continuously strives to introduce a more varied and diverse range of books.

The readers feel that books and newspapers have enhanced their knowledge and generated more awareness. Most importantly they have enjoyed reading and found the books interesting. However, in most libraries, members have now read all the books and are impatiently waiting for more. This is an important issue to be addressed for the future of any library. Simply setting up the library is not sufficient. Without a continuing infusion of new books, the library will lose credibility with its members and readers.

Maintaining a Collection

To ensure that sufficient number of books is in circulation, one possible option discussed with librarians and implementing agencies was creating a central library based on a cluster of 25-30 libraries. Another option would be to keep different sets of books in different libraries, and rotate the books among the libraries. But those were early days when both librarians and partner agencies were learning the ropes. They were unsure of their capacity to handle the logistics of such an arrangement. Four years into the programme, these ideas are being seriously considered along with the field agencies.

The number of books across the libraries ranges from 400 to 800. Libraries being set up now have different sets of books, unlike earlier where all the libraries in an area kept the same set of books. Apart from additional books received from the programme, libraries have collected many books,

magazines, reference books and guides for competitive exams which have often been acquired by donation.



Some libraries have succeeded in collecting books from schools, welfare organisations and individuals. In Durg, 400 books were donated to a library taking the total number to 800. Though this was an exceptional case, some libraries in other states have added 20 to 50 titles from community contribution. Creating 'book banks' is another option being explored by many libraries.

The project provides for additional books worth Rs2000, over a two year period. But in the face of persistent demands for more books, this figure may need revision. For adding books, the partners together have worked out certain criteria. The library should have a minimum of 35 members, Rs500 in the bank account and should be at least one-year old. These criteria are relaxed for hill areas.

Newspapers - a Crowd Puller

The greatest attraction the library offers its leader's is newspapers. People wait impatiently for papers to arrive. On the supply side, service delivery which was a problem in some villages, has been solved by eager newspaper agents, who can sense the market potential.

Newspapers are kept at a central place in the village and returned to the library in the evening. Influential people like the Sarpanch or the headmaster at times hijack the papers. The Trabhari library committee and the field agency have to sometimes intervene and ensure that papers are accessible to all. Newspaper reading sessions, often followed by discussions on current affairs, are common in many project villages.

Facing a financial crunch, the ZSSS Ajmer had stopped supply of newspapers for some months in 1997. Every time ZSSS' representatives visited a village, they were assailed by protests and grievances; the office was flooded with complaints. Though it had become a habit with the readers, only one village in the entire district arranged to get its own paper.

Agencies keen to take up the programme in Nainital and Almora argued for providing popular magazines to the library. They felt that the team was trying to impose reading preferences on the members. To an extent, this was true. Experience had shown that succumbing to sensational, gossipy writings was easy. Introducing such material to an audience with no reading habit could be counter-productive. The other issue was of the cost involved. Subscriptions for magazines were far more expensive than books. The newspapers too carried regular features and political analysis. It was decided that the village committee could, in later years, keep magazines if it so wished.



THE LIBRARIAN

A large part of the credit of whatever success the programme has achieved goes to the librarian. To run an institution without any experience is a difficult job. And librarians have on the whole done very well.

The librarian is identified, guided and monitored by the Village Library Committee. The person selected should be literate and able to write clearly and quickly. An important consideration is that the person should enjoy a close rapport with and confidence of the local community. As far as possible women should be selected.

Increasing the number of members is always a concern for librarians as they perceive it as an indicator of their performance. However, it is important to realise that the support of the community, an active supervisor, and the backing of the field agency, all affect the performance of the librarian.

In Lucknow, the NGO had laid down the stipulation that the librarian would be paid Rs5 per member to a maximum of Rs250. In Ajmer, 'Prabharis' had put in their own money to show a higher number of members. The person whose name was used was not even aware that he was a member. In other instances, a person would take a receipt for membership

fee with a promise to pay later but never would. The librarian would end up paying from her/his own pocket.



Librarians have to deal with many tricky issues in their daily routine. Books are not returned despite constant follow-up and home visits. Some readers, out of spite for not getting their choice of books, deliberately damage books. Visits to the library by members at times become infrequent. People ridiculed the nature of the job that involved maintaining individual contact with the families. Hijacking of newspapers by the rich and influential is another problem. When the librarian cannot deal with such issues on her own, she approaches village elders and the village committee for assistance and support. The supervisor and the field agency can also provide guidance and support.

There is a turnover among librarians who often leave for a better opportunity, so induction and training of new recruits is an on-going activity. The issue of women librarians is discussed separately.

In some districts, librarians are offering voluntary services while in most others they are paid an honorarium of Rs300. Whether their commitment and performance levels are different, depending on how they are remunerated, needs to be studied.

Library Training and Systems

With the training given, each librarian can maintain a record of books received and issued. As the programme has moved forward, a distinct lacuna in the librarian's training was noticed. There was no structured approach by the librarian towards developing and obtaining financial inputs towards the running of the library, though the orientation of the librarian had always included aspects of self reliance, bank accounts and so on. This aspect was found essential as the librarian is one of the key persons working towards a self-reliant library.

The training and library systems should be able to cope with the increase in number of books over the years. The scenario of eight to ten years down

the line could be a lot different, when each library may possess more than a thousand books. The system should be geared to ensure that a quick and easy retrieval of books is possible and that books are not duplicated. A cataloguing system at the level of a village or a cluster needs to be put in place.

Attempts are always made to expose the librarian to a wider world view. All the 28 librarians were invited to visit the 'World Book Fair, 1994'. Though many stalls and the books were not in Hindi, the group went through every stall with interest. They collected book lists to mark their choices. A welcome tea at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation followed by a meeting with the Chairperson, Ms Sonia Gandhi, were other highlights of their visit. A similar trip was arranged for the librarians in West Bengal to the Calcutta Book Fair in 1995. To further develop their potential, librarians are encouraged to pursue higher studies through open school.

Librarians of all the ten villages managed by a NGO in Lucknow meet every month. The venue is rotated among different libraries. This gives the librarians a chance to see how their colleagues manage the programme. Each librarian makes a small presentation and they discuss common problems.



The Librarian as a Development Worker

Can the librarian don the mantle of a development worker? This is another moot point. With only a small honorarium and limited spare time available, this may be a difficult task. Also if the library is to emerge as a vibrant information centre, a large part of the responsibility rests on the community. Both the community and the librarian require additional inputs. The interest and commitment of the local agency are essential to provide the necessary impetus for this.

Yet, it cannot be denied that librarians are emerging as influential persons in their areas, and many have added several new dimensions to their work in an attempt to retain the interest of the members in the library.

Some librarians on their own teach children and adults. A few women librarians have taught tailoring to young women. Sports events and cultural functions are regularly organised. District and block level officers are sometimes invited to discuss development programmes.

In Ajmer, the ZSSS conducted a campaign to identify and list health problems in all the villages. A door-to-door survey was conducted, and health profiles of each individual, family and village were prepared. The campaign was conducted through the Prabharis.

A Muslim woman librarian in Durg organised a 'Ramayan Mandali' of women. Though she earned the wrath of fundamentalist elements in her own village, she continued to strengthen the group. The group actively participated in various religious and cultural functions.

In all the 50 villages where libraries are running in Durg, a competition of healthy children was organised. Proud mothers with their clean and neat children enthusiastically participated. Huge balances, used to measure grains, substituted as weighing machines. The events also gave an opportunity to discuss issues relating to children's health.



In Lucknow, librarians are collaborating with the administration for distribution of pension cheques'. They also conduct literacy classes on their own initiative.

Librarians have developed good rapport with the families and are often seen as counsellors especially where education of children is concerned. They have received requests for skills training. With their experience of working as a public representative, some librarians have ventured into politics. In Tamil Nadu, many women librarians have won panchayat elections but continue to work with the library.

SPACE

Importance of obtaining a suitable building has been underscored repeatedly in the programme. It is one of the most significant contributions by the community for the programme. Most libraries are located in private houses, at times in the librarian's own house.

When libraries are located in one corner of the village, the librarians carry books every morning and evening to a place frequented by the members. This arrangement is not only tedious but also increases the risks of books being misplaced or lost.

The following examples reflect interesting arrangements that have emerged:

In Ramnad and in PMT, libraries are close to the temple and in one instance actually inside it. In PMT, buildings were constructed within a year of the programme through the MP's fund. Some libraries in Ramnad housed in panchayat buildings, have been asked to vacate, as the new panchayats formed needed the rooms. While the onus eventually lies with the ZSSS, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation could lobby with the District Administration for working out a long term solution.

In Haridwar, the agency identified a big room in the Panchayat Complex on the main road. Well lit and ventilated, the place would have been ideal for a library, except that it was next to a Provincial Armed Constabulary camp, where men lounged around semi-clad. The place was an obvious 'no' for women. An old couple in the village then offered one room in their house.

BENMILK, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation's partner agency in West Bengal, decided that the libraries would be set up in the collection centres. A small cramped room with milk testing equipment and animal feed was not the best of places for a library. The team lobbied with the respective district administrations to allocate some space for the library, but they made no firm commitments. BENMILK has promised to provide separate rooms eventually. Though many libraries continue in the collection centres, for others, women members have given a room in their houses. One librarian has displayed the books in her bedroom.



In Ajmer, libraries were located in a room constructed within the school compound. The schools were often on the outskirts of the village and the librarian carried a bunch of books to the main chaupal of the village. The

ZSSS moved the library not only for the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation programme but for all its centres to a more convenient location, even though in some places it had to hire a room.

Display of Books

The upkeep of the library has a direct influence on its effectiveness and impact as an information centre. A neat display on racks, walls adorned with maps, alphabet charts, quotations, rules of the library, a working table for the librarian and finally the clock, have created a positive ambience for the library. Librarians have been shown the importance of keeping the library clean, tidy and in order in their training. For example books are stacked by subject and kept back on the rack only by the librarian, and not by the members.

With the intention of promoting use of local resources, a possibility of using stone slabs as racks was explored in Ajmer. But it was found that the slabs would not be cost effective and would be difficult to maintain. In the UP Hills, though, the enterprise unit of one NGO was given the responsibility of making wooden racks for all the libraries in the region.

Given the humidity in West Bengal, books are not kept in open iron racks that may become rusted. As a further safeguard, books were specially wrapped in plastic covers.

ZSSS Nizamabad, took up the responsibility of providing furniture to the libraries. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation had reiterated time and again, that display had to be in open racks, whether of iron or wood. The ZSSS kept its word and provided wooden racks but the size was such that not even 30 books could be well displayed.



The racks given to each library can display 400 to 700 books. As the number of books grows, display will become a critical concern. Should the librarian stack the books on the racks, string them along or simply shove them against the wall? Would the library require more furniture? The maps and charts already show signs of damage. Is there any need to replace them? These are some questions that the community needs to be prepared for.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

In retrospect, the programme has realised that the two activities - skill training and rural publishing - require substantial capacity building across the areas where the programme has been operating. Absence of such a capacity to undertake this function has led to poor follow-up and ill-defined linkages.

Specific ideas and projects were discussed with field agencies and villages. However, in the initial years, this is not a pressing priority. Energies across the programme have been concentrated on consolidating the village library, assessing its functioning, and also providing smooth systems for the libraries - both aspects being important for programme sustainability. Consequently, area specific strategies for extension activities have not yet been comprehensively developed.

Now that a pattern has emerged for establishing and managing a library, more attention is being given to extension activities. Learning from experience, there is more clarity on likely problems and possible solutions.

Skill Training

Discussion about upgrading and improving existing skills, especially for women, began with the community from the first interactions. The priorities for women might be limited to tailoring and stitching. For on-going activities, the inputs required were small and specific but extremely critical. For example, weavers in Rajasthan wanted assistance in design, fast colours, marketing support and upgrading of the manufacturing processes.



It was intended that the resource persons would visit the area, study all facets of the activity, identify gaps, and then design appropriate interventions. Training to the extent possible would be conducted at the village itself. A network of the relevant block, district and independent institutions, including financing agencies, would be created to ensure smooth follow-up.

This could not really happen as envisaged. The concept of entrepreneurship development was not understood clearly and an orientation to managing a business was missing. It proved difficult to identify resource agencies willing to train at the local level. Another critical weakness lay in the inability to identify important linkages as well as plan and resource the necessary follow up before actually starting the training.

Tanners in a project village were aware of new methods that would make the tanning process more hygienic and increase the yield. A leading NGO suggested that tanners from Rajasthan be sent to its centre in Himachal Pradesh for three month training. The Khadi & Village Industries (KVIC) was then approached for technical and marketing support. Their resource persons visited the area, interacted with the tanners, identified gaps and confirmed dates for training in the village itself. They had to get expert help from Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI) Chennai, and could not arrange for this. A good programme was thwarted by poor inter-organisational linkages even before it could be completely defined.

Khadi & Village Industries (KVIC), Jaipur organised for the training of one weaver from a project village as Master Trainer, on a new improved loom. However, after the training, he could not purchase a loom. Khadi & Village Industries (KVIC), had no provision for financial support, and district level financial institutions were unable to help as he did not meet the selection criteria.

In an attempt to introduce women to non-traditional skills, training was organised in a project village by ZSSS Ajmer for making decorative lights. Markets were identified and deals negotiated. However, the group needed seed capital. Again, finance became a problem because the group did not meet the several norms laid down by different institutions.

Khadi & Village Industries (KVIC), Madurai had a good presence in Ramnad, and the Collector had initiated discussions with them. After considerable discussion, the choice of activity was narrowed to a spinning unit for women members of the libraries. KVIC would train and subsequently link the members with its on-going programme. A part of the proceeds of the produce sold during the training would be remitted to the library account.



The programme, which was inaugurated with much emotion on Gandhi Jayanti, 1995, succeeded in running one unit successfully. For the second unit, Khadi & Village Industries (KVIC), proposed that an on-going training programme be picked up by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. A library could be opened in that village and all trainees enrolled as members. This suggestion, contrary to the objective of the library programme, was rejected. The matter has not yet been resolved.

The local agencies feel that skill training can be one powerful way to increase the bonding of the village with the library learning from past mistakes, the programme tries to ensure that the activity is feasible, viable and will provide sustained income to the members. A series of training programmes is on the anvil. In Lucknow, marketing tie ups were finalised before starting 'Agarbatti training for women'. A NGO in the UP Hills has trained members in growing the gladioli flowers. In West Bengal, training for gardening, animal husbandry and poultry programmes are being conducted.

Publishing

Rural publishing continues to generate considerable enthusiasm in the field. The three books produced under the programme from Ajmer are extremely popular with the readers. Yet, the actual output does not reflect the intensive processes that have gone into the production of these books. The standards expected were high, but the investment in sharpening the writing skills has proved to be insufficient.

An encouraging response to the idea of rural publishing was received from Rajasthan and West Bengal. The manuscripts received from West Bengal had tragic undertones, while from Ajmer a large number were on agriculture. Durg with a rich culture and a ZSSS already into writing forwarded some manuscripts that the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation could not accept. The district since then has tied up with the National Book Trust.



Manuscripts were received from all the places where author workshops were held, but these were often weak in both content and presentation. Only a small percentage, not more than 10% could be considered for eventual publication after substantial reworking. Manuscripts were field tested with the readers. The feedback given to the author was not always sufficiently clearly explained. As a result, a revised manuscript still needed more work to be done on it. Delayed response mechanisms and weak follow up, a responsibility of the national partner, resulted in authors losing interest.

The aspect of rural publishing offers a tremendous scope to capture the rural perspective and wisdom. The programme needs to institute quick response mechanisms and invest in aspiring authors. Aggressive marketing of books already published should be done, and the royalty shared with the author and the library. Only then can the credibility of the publishing programme begin to be firmly established.

II Community Participation

The village library programme has been a success because the community has backed it. Motivation levels of the librarian influence community involvement, as do availability of books, extension activities, and regular programme support. This section discusses the issues of membership and people's participation, especially of women, in the programme.

USERS

Indicators of the community's involvement and the health of the library are the number of members of the library, total savings accumulated in the bank account, and the number of books circulated. If one-tenth of the population of the village uses the library, with the number of members ranging from 35 to 50, the number of books circulated is about 10 every day and the amount posted in the account is around Rs 500, then a library can be considered a success.

A village in Durg called Achanakpur, true to its name, has 79 female members out of a total of 85. In the same district, 2 disabled librarians have registered 100 members from the village.

In Ajmer a conscious decision was taken by the village that no fee will be charged from neo-literates for the first six months of membership. It was also decided that on the merit of the case, the fee may be waived or reduced altogether for SC & ST members.

Libraries in West Bengal were set up with women's cooperatives. Membership in consequence was restricted to women. Six months later repeated requests were received by men who wanted to either become members in the existing libraries or open their own libraries. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has since agreed to open of general libraries.



Average membership of libraries is 35, but the families of individual members also using the library should be taken into account. The amount accumulated from membership fees and fines vary from Rs 400 to Rs 4000. The daily circulation of books varies, but is around 8 to 10 books. Each member on an average reads 3 to 4 books a month.

Membership fees in most libraries continue to be Rs20 annually. In the initial stages, the library offered monthly, yearly and half yearly memberships. Very soon it became apparent that the librarians were having a difficult time in collecting fees every month. The option of monthly membership, though still available, is not being promoted by the librarian.

Books are issued against a member's card. An entire family can get the books issued, even though only one person is a member. An analysis of members by sex does not really show to what extent women are using the library. Though adults were the initial audience, the library attracts children, youth and women the most.

As one of the unspoken norms, the programme had stressed that only members be allowed to borrow books. In practice this was difficult to follow. "This is a place for knowledge. We can't say no to people." The Prabharis felt that they could not turn away a guest from another village.

Visits of non-members from the same village gave the librarians an opportunity to market the library, something similar to a free trial. After a couple of visits, non-members were persuaded to become members and contribute to the growth of the library.

The use of a library is directly related to the collection and interest value of books available. In Lucknow, the circulation of books in one village reached an all time high of 1800 in a month, when new books were received by the libraries.



Without new books, members in very few places want to continue their membership. Even if they continue as members, they do not use a library which has nothing new to offer. In such a scenario, where the response from the village is not encouraging, librarians will begin to feel bored and restless. There is a danger that this sense of drudgery may extend to the programme. Some agencies seem to think that a drive or a campaign may help. But then again, in the absence of fresh inputs, especially books, such a drive may not be effective. This is probably the most important factor to be addressed for the sustain ability and overall success of the programme, where the availability of suitable titles, money for their purchase and systems, for ensuring that more books continue to be purchased, all need to be in place.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Community ownership for the programme is very real and palpable. The library is a landmark, a matter of pride for the village. The community has arranged rooms for all the libraries. The local agency often receives a request from a village for inclusion in the programme. For example, a small village in Ajmer forwarded a draft to the ZSSS to start a library.

A group of people exists in each village which takes active interest in the programme and maintains a close interaction with supervisors and coordinators. For each library, a library committee was envisaged. Though the community has backed the programme, library committees in many cases have not been constituted formally. Wherever in place, the VLCs meet regularly. The discussion usually centres around increasing the number of

members, sourcing new books, retrieving books and dealing with difficult members.

Women's Participation

The programme design focused on participation of women by promoting a set of favourable conditions. In discussion with the community, women's access to the library was stressed. A deliberate effort was made to include books of interest to women. An important factor is the location of the library - such that it be safe and accessible to women. Representation of women on the village committee was made mandatory. Suitable women were encouraged to become librarians.



While in the South, the ratio of women and men librarians is 60-40, in the North it is 30-70. In West Bengal all librarians are women. The programme in Ramnad and FMT has made a conscious attempt to select women. The only 'problem' occurs when they get married and decide to leave, then a new woman has to be freshly trained.

In as many places as possible, women librarians were appointed. The trainers found no difference in the learning skills of women and men. But in many libraries, especially in the North, the women selected as librarians were replaced despite the agreed intention to involve women. The reasons given included lack of time, lack of family support, not educated enough, too much work to cope with, inability to deal with rogues. The work involved mobilisation of the community often by approaching each household individually. For doing this work, women were sometimes mocked at and treated with disdain. A weak support system perpetuated this disrespect for her work. At some places, in the interest of the library, the village and the local agency felt that replacing them was the only option. As a consequence, women readers feel hesitant in approaching a male librarian.

In Ramnad and PMT, women use libraries more than men. In Ajmer, despite an initial understanding with the village committee, 'bahus' do not come to the library. They make their requests through children or directly to

the librarian. Except in West Bengal, where members are only women, they are not very visible, even though they use the library.

Women are more interested in reading about religious stories, traditional customs and so on. Gradually they move on to short stories and family dramas. The programme has to respect their interests, yet simultaneously introduce them to a better quality of literature.

The field situation reflects a need to make the programme teams gender-sensitive so that they can develop strategic initiatives for women. Participation cannot be mistaken for empowerment. Even in Ramnad and PMT, the programme is not really investing in gender and development.

Women stepping out of their houses for the first time require encouragement, skills and a conducive environment. The teams often, while bearing a positive attitude towards women, were not trained in understanding the women's position and their special needs and consequently could not invest sufficiently in capacity building in women.

III Moving Towards Self Reliance



In each of the villages and with each partner agency, withdrawal of support after about two years and possible ways in which a library could become self-reliant, were discussed. Yet the agencies gave it serious consideration only after the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation communicated its decision to withdraw support from 121 libraries that had been operational for well over two years from October 1997.

Though the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation will not extend financial support for day-to-day running of the libraries after withdrawal, it will continue to support and nurture initiatives in rural publishing and the skills development programmes. The Foundation is also open to starting more libraries in other villages in the same area.

Agencies feel that the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation should continue to provide intellectual and programme support. Several initiatives can be strategically designed and linked that will continue to enrich the programme and strengthen the community. A clear and urgent need is to provide training

in leadership development and programme management to the committee members and the librarian. Other forms of continuing support could be networking the libraries with block and district programmes, assisting in fund raising, and maintaining an active contact.

The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has worked out certain criteria for identifying libraries from which support should be withdrawn either due to their steadily improving condition or due to hopeless performance. These need to be communicated and shared more clearly with the community and local agencies. Feedback from the field and libraries may help the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation further fine-tune these criteria and adjust them to region-specific requirements as the programme moves forward.

Recurring expenses for new books, newspapers, honorarium for librarian and maintenance need to be arranged. Where they pay no honorarium for a librarian, agencies are more confident. Yet a related concern is whether librarians can be sustained on motivation alone, especially in view of the enhanced roles expected of them.

The local agencies propose to continue supporting the libraries once the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation support is withdrawn, either through their own resources or/and by fund-raising for a further period of two to three years. This is not a sufficient answer to the problem of self-reliance, as it transfers the burden of subsidising the running cost to another agency, and delays the implementation of local income generating and fundraising activity. Suggestions for funding the library range from continuing with income generation programmes through Mahila Mandals to providing text books at a fee; and also raising finances from other funding agencies, individuals, industry, etc. Book donation drives could also be conducted. In Ajmer, the ZSSS has introduced the concept of 'Adopt a Library', where an individual or agency would perhaps donate finances to the corpus of the library. People extending support are publicly acknowledged and recognised.



Though the issue of withdrawal has not been extensively discussed with the libraries, the community has always rejected discussions on closure of libraries. They understand and value the presence of a library especially for children and youth. They probably cannot articulate the usefulness of the

library beyond, “We read good books, and we gain knowledge. Children learn good values too.” But readers realise the potential in improving their quality of life. Closure of libraries in any village, has met with strong protest and anger.

Libraries have reached a position of self-reliance at least in terms of establishing the usefulness of the programme. An issue being raised is whether two years is a sufficient period of time to invest in a development programme that is attempting to inculcate a new thought process. The community now understands the purpose and importance of the library, from an earlier stage of indifference. Investments in capacity building of the community and committee members to run the library may still be insufficient. Local agencies feel that it will probably take another few years before the community is ready to manage the programme by itself. Perhaps, the time period in actualising self-reliance needs to be reviewed although this has resource implications either for the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation or the local agency, or both.



It has taken time to put the systems in place. Any major extension of activities to include publishing and skill training would not contribute substantially to the programme. The financial health of the library based on membership subscriptions and income from publishing and training did not match the original expectations which perhaps with hindsight were unrealistic.

It has so far not been possible to develop a clear strategy to ensure that a cluster of libraries does not collapse after support is withdrawn. Should an audit of the libraries be undertaken to gauge their readiness and preparedness to be independent, before withdrawal of financial support is considered? Does a follow up mechanism need to be put in place to ensure that the libraries become the institution as envisaged? Or should the libraries be allowed to follow their own natural course? They would, subject to the readers' interest, either end as dumps for disused books or become vibrant and thriving information centres.

Rajiv Gandhi Foundation is of the view that a programme that has evolved from the field owes it to the people to explain the current position,

share a forum to discuss future options and directions, and plan a joint strategy based on field experience. With much effort, partnerships were put in place to set up and run the libraries not only with the local agency but directly with the villages. These partnerships should be a building block to take the programme forward. For readers, there is a sense of pride, a realisation that they are part of a larger family, and despite problems, together they can find solutions to strengthen the programme. The essence of the partnership is not only monetary, but being friends and associates who share a common concern and have put in their best to implement a difficult concept.

However, it is clear that phased withdrawal from the older and better established libraries must begin if new areas are to be covered, and the programme is to extend and develop. What mechanisms should fill the space created is an aspect the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation will need to work on in the next phase of the programme.





The programme has realised the goal it had set for itself of contributing towards the creation of a reading society. There is a growing demand for books where the libraries have been established) an impatience never expected from rural areas.

Over the years, the programme has become broader based, moving from neo-literates to encompassing readers from all age groups and profiles, developing a model for slums and working with different kinds of partner organisations.

Experience has given useful pointers to strengthen the programme. Need for capacity building in areas of gender, community development, leadership, programme management and entrepreneurship development have emerged. The challenge lies in demystifying the big words to finding practical, area specific inputs.

The Foundation does not want to be the sole agency handling the programme but wishes to disseminate and share it with a larger number of NGOs, institutions and government agencies. Libraries could be adapted and meshed easily with other programmes promoting rural development. Decentralisation of programme implementation and management is on the agenda and regional nodal points may be developed.

The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation is increasingly looking at its future role as a nodal agency which will provide the technical inputs, prevent undue distortion of the model developed and lend its name to the programme.

Other NGOs would be encouraged to take up the village library programme, with their own resources, as part of their own programmes.



To increase the spread of the programme, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation is also thinking of creating a cadre of 'Master Trainers', who would go as paid consultants to train librarians and provide the technical inputs to other NGOs interested to implement village libraries. They will be based at different parts of the country and operate independent of the national agency. The libraries offer an exciting platform for social change. Information is power in today's world. Enabling people to access information would lead to their empowerment, and allow them to bring about change on their own, at their pace, for their felt needs.

The concept of village libraries remains as true today as it did when the first two libraries were started. The challenge is to build on what has been achieved the very real success as well as the practical working experience and an appreciation of some of the difficulties - to sustain a literate society by bringing books and information to people in a simple, sustainable and cost effective way.



END

